

A sermon on Luke 2:41-52  
Christmas 1 C  
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Wow...we're only a couple days removed from Christmas, the birth of the Christ child, and now he's already 12 years old. It doesn't take long for Jesus to grow up, does it?

Luke, however, assures us that Jesus is raised right by his parents. They did everything by the book. They followed the customs of their faith. He was circumcised on the 8<sup>th</sup> day. He was presented to God in the temple six weeks later. His family kept all the religious traditions. They did what they were supposed to do. That is just how they lived. And it doesn't look as though Jesus had any choice in the matter either. We might be inclined to say that Jesus was raised in a good home.

Well, at least we think he was. The Bible has almost nothing to say about it. These slim verses from the Gospel of Luke are the only ones in the Bible to take up Jesus' childhood. The little we can take from these verses suggests that Jesus knew the rituals. He was acquainted with the moral life of his faith, the law. Like most of us, his home, his temple, his family, and his faith formed him.

That is similar to what happens in our families. When a child is born, the child is brought to the baptismal font for the sacrament. We don't routinely ask a child what faith they want to be raised in. The child doesn't get any more say in whom their God will be than they did in choosing their parents. We don't usually ask the child what they'd want. We do it like we're supposed to do.

And then we raise our child in that faith. That happens at home in kept rituals like Bible reading, prayers, and taught behaviors. It also happens in church when the family attends worship and children go to Sunday School, sing in one of the children's choirs, participate in children's sermons, and learn the Lord's prayer and the Creed with the congregation. And then soon comes confirmation, that Lutheran rite of passage by which a young person gets to weigh in on their own baptism, a chance to state publicly what they think of it. It is around that time that we customarily say that a child makes a life transition from childhood into adulthood. Now they are making some of their own first steps toward claiming the faith as their own.

That, too, is a major and sometimes awkward transition for a parent. And for parents that's never easy. Perhaps that is why Luke included one of those awkward moments in his gospel.

To Jesus' parents, the age of twelve was a major turning point. For their culture, that was about the age for naming the transition to full adult responsibilities. As these transitions

so are seldom done with grace, rarely without some uneasy drama, and it is almost never smooth.

And for parents it includes those times of drawing the line. You've got to pick your fights carefully. You will not win all of them. Some days you'd be happy to just win a couple of them. Parents have to decide when to be lenient and when to be strict, and no one gets it right all of the time.

The transition for Jesus had, in addition, to negotiate the careful boundaries between the private world of women and the public world of men, at least how it played out in those times. Up until this time Jesus – as a boy -- would have been primarily accountable to his mother, and beginning about now, entering the public sphere of relations with men, as a man. That is significant. From how this episode is told, it appears that Jesus is well on his way in this transition. All by himself he was holding court in the temple, in public, with the men. As manhood approaches, this is one of the most crucial tests.

It would be only natural that we might harbor some criticism of Jesus' parents. I mean, how could they let that happen, leaving their boy behind. What were they thinking? How could they forget their own boy like that? Even pastors learn early on that when coming back from a church retreat it's important to come back with about the same number as you went with.

In those days travel was much more dangerous than it is now. People tended to travel in large groups for protection. And if your child was a young man – Jesus' age – it would not be unusual to be getting used to his coming to take care of himself. In fact, the more mature he was, the more he had already successfully negotiated that boundary between childhood and adulthood, and the better equipped you would expect him to be on his own like that, even for a few days. It's one of those tense boundary areas for parents to negotiate with their children.

I mean, at a parent, there's only so much you can do. You have to let go, allow them to take risks on their own, make their own mistakes, bask in their own successes. As a parent how much do you say? How much do you do? Is he still your little boy, or is he now his own young man? You can stand with his mother's anxiety about this, can't you?

“Jesus, can't you see what you're doing to us?” It's one of those anxious questions that springs unbidden in anxious situations. This is what it looks like when the Christ-Child, the one born in Bethlehem, announced to be the Savior, takes his first steps out of his family of origin, you might say, and into his true family, his father, the God who sent him.

“Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?” Don't you realize I must be about my Father's business? And what is the business of that Father if not to redeem, rescue, gather the world back from its insignificance, its aimlessness, its sin? No wonder his parents didn't get it.

The story ends with Jesus going home with his parents and, by way of afterthought, remarking that he was otherwise obedient to them. It's a way of saying, my, what a fine young man Jesus was growing into.

Luke then fills in the gap from age twelve to about thirty with the singular comment, "Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor."

Now you have the social explanation of this story. You've been filled in on the customs, the way children grew up in those times. But the driving engine of the story is not the customary but the theological. The theological point is that Jesus' true father, God the Father, won't let anything get in the way of Jesus' mission, not even his earthly parents.

The very first words that Jesus speaks in this gospel are the words about that mission, "Why are you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" Jesus begins by telling everyone that he *must* be about his Father's interests, and he doesn't mean Joseph. He means it's God the Father, his Father.

And what are that Father's interests? This is a God who, whenever he gets the chance, makes new and powerful promises to his people. This is not new with Jesus' appearance. He's been doing it from the very beginning. Those promises are what God has always done. They are shot through the world. They are "in, with, and under" the world. They are the infinite laced through the finite.

And now at this end of the ages, Jesus has come to *do* God's promises to us and all creation. For God is determined to accomplish his will, his will to save. And God will not let anything – anything – get in the way: not earthly parents, not emperors, presidents, not even religious leaders or religious institutions, not our own sins or unfaithfulness. Not even the cross.

For God is still, even now, at work bringing salvation to the world God loves so very much. That work happens in, with, and under...in ways sometimes so hidden and mysterious we simply miss them. Yet, and this is God's promise, Christ Jesus came to save...and save he will...no matter what it takes.

A baby born in that manger in Bethlehem is Christ our Lord. A young man holding forth in the temple in Jerusalem is Christ our Lord. A man gibbeted to the cross outside Jerusalem is Christ Jesus our Lord. Nothing will stop him. And that is the good news this morning. Amen.